

# 2 Going virtual, staying face-to-face: trajectory of ELT classes during the pandemic

Daniel A. Nkemleke<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

COVID-19 caught everyone by surprise, and even the most advanced higher education institutions around the world probably had challenges moving from Face-to-Face (F2F) to online teaching and learning. For Cameroon, where internet connectivity is still very low, both teachers and students have had a hard time switching to virtual classrooms. This chapter discusses the challenges they have faced in navigating this trajectory in the department of English at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) of the University of Yaoundé 1 (UYI) during the period of lockdown. Based on the experience of 14 teachers who grappled with 14 online courses and F2F mode, the study concludes that due to students' inability to access the internet with ease, any online teaching/learning at ENS has to be largely complemented with F2F activities.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, online language teaching, Ecole Normale Supérieure Yaoundé, Cameroon.

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1. University of Yaoundé 1, Yaoundé, Cameroon; [nkemlekedan@yahoo.com](mailto:nkemlekedan@yahoo.com); <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0048-9067>

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Administrative riposte in the light of a health pandemic

The coronavirus disrupted academic agendas in higher education institutions across the world (Azzi-Huck & Shmis, 2020; Kathmandu, 2020; Ngogi, 2020) and African universities, which have limited technology infrastructures and seem to have suffered the most (Aborode et al., 2020; Thelma & Adeniran, 2020). According to a recent UNESCO report, 9.8 million African students experienced disruption in their studies due to the closure of higher education institutions<sup>2</sup>. Cameroon officially acknowledged the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic in its territory when two cases were detected at a local airport in the capital city of Yaoundé on March 6, 2020, barely a month into the second semester (Onana, 2020). On March 18, the government officially closed down schools and universities and outlined social distancing measures in public places throughout the country. This new status quo raised fear and anxiety on the part of many actors and stakeholders of society, including our university administration, whose immediate preoccupation was how to bring the academic year to a successful end while safeguarding the health of all members of the university community. Prior to the government lockdown of March 18, the rector of the UYI had anticipated the worst case scenario and had issued his first press release on March 16, in which F2F lectures in amphitheatres and other lecture halls with a capacity of more than 150 students were temporarily suspended. Also, a virtual platform was created at the University Centre for Information Technology (CUTI) for teachers to upload content online<sup>3</sup>. The rector's press release was reported on the official website of the state-owned radio station (CRTV) as follows<sup>4</sup>: “[t]here will be a change in the university's programme from March 17 to April 13, 2020, in order to avoid a crowd of students in one area and to avoid the spread of COVID-19”. In another press release on March 25, the rector asked all institutions of the

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2. <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

3. <https://www.camerounweb.com/CameroonHomePage/NewsArchive/Coronavirus-l-universit-de-Yaound-l-suspend-ses-cours-498841>

4. <http://www.crtv.cm/2020/03/covid19-university-of-yaounde-i-takes-preventive-measures/>

university to explore the opportunities that technology offers for hybrid learning and to envisage creating online platforms to deliver content.

## **1.2. Technology-based-learning at the UYI: a review of digital experiences prior COVID-19**

In the past several years, the UYI has identified the digital teaching method as a key asset to solve the problem of high student-enrolment numbers in the institution. In fact in 2007, the government had defined technology-based education as one of its key strategic development goals and had urged all sectors of society to begin a process of adaptation to this new exigency (ANTIC, 2007)<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, in 2008 the Alumni of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in Cameroon applied for and obtained German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) funding to run four e-learning schools in the span of two years in Yaoundé (2011-2012), with the last one held in Stuttgart, Germany (Teke, 2012). These e-learning schools trained a critical mass of university teachers who were to replicate their expertise with subsequent generations of peers. Specifically, they went through the following with keen interest: (1) e-learning in higher education, concepts, and templates (July 2011); (2) content development and content organisation for e-learning (December 2011); (3) teaching and learning with different models of e-learning (April/May 2012), and (4) quality assessment and review of e-learning content and learning processes (November 2012).

The multiplier effect of this venture has been significant. Teke (2012), for example, undertook a project to digitalise a course on critical theory for postgraduate students at the UYI and assess the contribution of the project on the critical development of students in technology-based skills. The experience of Teke (2012) in running such a course online enabled him to conclude that “the dynamism of the lecturer [online] and the multiple involvements of learners militate in favour of an effective e-learning atmosphere” (p.74). This is corroborated by the experience of others working in similar situations in Cameroon, who concluded that in a multivariate e-learning platform, students

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5. See “ICT in Education in Cameroon” (2007): [www.infodev.org/en/Document.390.pdf](http://www.infodev.org/en/Document.390.pdf)

often learn even ahead of timed lectures (Achale, Mambeh, & Chomgwain, 2007). In the same perspective, a survey of the perception of 218 students, 57 residents, and 32 teachers in the Faculty of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences (FMBS) in the UYI by Bediang et al. (2013) reports that “most participants have fairly good experiences in accessing content online, although good practices about their use remained insufficiently known” (p. 7). On the whole, the study concludes that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) integration in the FMBS is still mostly individually-based and lacks coordination. Further, a survey by Nkemleke and Tume (2020) on the use of WhatsApp to conduct a summary writing class at the time of coronavirus at ENS reveals that students’ perception of teaching and learning through technology was very positive. This positive perception was mainly due to easy accessibility of smartphones and other digital platforms by students. The Faculty of Engineering (polytechnique) of the UYI houses the most important learning management system, Moodle, of the institution. It also runs a MOOCS for course development programmes. Experts from polytechnique provide regular training programmes for online courses and management to staff in other university faculties. On an individual level, teachers in the UYI run personal online platforms with students for purposes of research. For example, I run an intra-African/German Postdoc Mentoring Online (iAG-POS<sup>6</sup>) platform for academic mentoring of junior scientists in the humanities from countries across Africa; 90% of the 51 members are in Cameroon. This platform is an affiliate of the bigger platform we have been running since 2015<sup>7</sup>. Initially sponsored by a grant from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the Academic Writing for Africa platform mentors research students online and prepares them for the writing of grant applications.

In brief, students and teachers in the UYI in general, and ENS Yaoundé in particular, are familiar with online platforms even if not on a very general scale. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, teachers had been used to delivering lectures to groups of students via Google Classroom, video conferences via WhatsApp, Zoom, etc. In fact, the Moodle platform that ENS presently manages has been

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6. <https://iag-posmo.org/>

7. <http://academicwriting-network4africa.org/>

in place for about a decade. Although COVID-19 had been a surprise to many in Cameroon as it had been elsewhere, our students were already familiar with online environments for educational purposes when the rector called for the intensification of online learning. This does not, however, mean that every teacher and student is positively motivated to engage with this. In fact, there are a number of digital novices among the students' and teachers' population of the university for whom the call for online classes was to be very challenging.

## 2. Objectives

Following the instructions of the university administration above, ENS, a teacher training institution of the UYI, began a series of consultations with teachers to implement instructions from the university hierarchy. This present article reports on the trajectory of our language/literature teaching courses in the department of English at ENS Yaoundé and how we grapple with teaching at this time of COVID-19, between the virtual space and F2F interaction. To attain this objective, it is important to mention the support that we received from university administration.

While the coronavirus outbreak uncovered the lack of preparation of many colleagues in the department to go online at a short notice, administrative support came readily and on time to dissipate lingering anxieties. One of the very first actions the rector took was to announce that teachers were to be paid an allowance for putting courses online. [Table 1](#) below details the number of press communiques and circular letters signed by the rector at various moments during the lockdown to guide the conduct of activities in the different faculties and university schools.

Application of the above directives required a certain amount of preliminary work at the level of each department. Since online learning is not just a question of uploading lecture notes and videos on a virtual platform, teachers had to write their lectures in a manner that would be easy for students to understand when they access them. But this was not done without difficulty, however. Section 3

outlines a profile of what teachers uploaded and the virtual platforms they used. It is followed by a preliminary survey of students' reaction and perception of the whole exercise. Section 4 concludes this chapter.

Table 1. Decisions taken by the rector to guide the conduct of pedagogic activities during COVID-19

<b>Date</b>	<b>Content</b>
March 16, 2020 (Ref. 20-321/UYI/CAB/R)	Press communique to faculty administrators, teachers, and students announcing the creation of an online platform at the CUTI
May 26, 2020 (Ref. 20-042/UYI/CAB/R)	Press communique to faculty administrators, teachers, and students announcing preparation for the resumption of F2F lectures in strict respect of barrier measures such as fragmentation of large classes into manageable groups
September 11, 2020 (Ref. 202208/UYI/CAB/R)	Circular letter to deans and directors of university faculties and schools, announcing the putting in place of virtual amphitheatres: each teacher/student is to be attributed an institutional email address
October 15, 2020 (Ref.202639/UYI/CAB/R)	Press communique to faculty administrators, teachers, and students announcing preparation for the resumption of F2F lectures for the first semester 2020/2021 academic year in strict respect of barrier measures such as fragmentation of large classes into manageable groups

### 3. Discussion: our teaching experiences during COVID-19

This section is divided into three phases. The first is the planning phase, where teachers designed lecture notes which were uploaded onto a virtual platform intended for students' self-study. The second is the follow-up phase, where teachers were encouraged to engage with students in interactive platforms of their choice. The third phase is the return to a pre-COVID-19 F2F situation. This last phase had been necessary to address recurrent complaints by the students who had some difficulties understanding some of the material put online. At the same time, it was an opportunity for teachers who had been unable to hold an online class (e.g. Teacher 7 in Table 2) to meet the students and accelerate their teaching programmes.

### 3.1. The planning phase: self-study material for students uploaded on a virtual platform

In response to the communique of March 16 (Table 1), teachers got to work, each person from their own location, because communication at this time of lockdown was only by telephone, emails, WhatsApp, and SMS. Heads of departments and heads of teaching units, including coordinators of different classes, contacted students via WhatsApp messages or telephone to inform them of what was happening. Once each teacher had finished preparing their lecture notes with accompanying documents, s/he sent them to CUTI, which had the responsibility to upload them onto a platform (see Figure 1 and supplementary materials for the content of 14 English language teaching courses uploaded). Students were informed to access them using a simple internet link.

Figure 1. CUTI interface @ UYI<sup>8</sup>



8. <http://www.coursuy1.uninet.cm/>

Obviously, asking students to download online study material was not without challenges. The department was ready at every moment to listen to the difficulties that students might encounter. To anticipate this, communication lines between the different classes and the teachers were kept open through class delegates, who would receive feedback from peers and then share the information with the teachers through personal SMS, telephone, and, in some cases, teachers' personal WhatsApps. This information would then be discussed during weekly coordination meetings at the level of the department. Up to this point, what we did not give a serious thought to, both at the level of the department and at the level of the school council, was that CUTI is only a repository of content.

Successful online learning is not guaranteed just by placing content online; rather, such material has to be accompanied by clear task-based instructions (Tuovinen, 2000; Zimmerman, 2012) and students have to be able to get instant feedback on their performances (Roussel, 2011). Students reported that they had difficulties understanding many of the materials which teachers had put online. Some reading texts had no 'how-to-do' instructions. Of course, problems with the content of these lecture notes were to be expected since the work had been done at short notice and under pressure.

Once it became clear from this preliminary feedback that some explanations of the online content would be necessary, the need for some kind of virtual interaction and eventually a return to a pre-COVID-19 F2F situation began to be contemplated.

### **3.2. The follow-up phase: teachers interact with students on virtual platforms**

In one of our weekly school coordination meetings, it was recommended that teachers should engage students in some form of virtual interaction, so specific questions from students could be addressed. Such follow-up was easy to begin, at least, for most of us in the department of English, since it had been a general practice for every class to have a WhatsApp forum. Table 2 shows the different web apps that were used to organise classes after this recommendation.



Table 2. Teachers/web apps used for online interaction

Teacher/ Apps used	WhatsApp class forum	Individual WhatsApp	Google classroom	Facebook group	Zoom	Padlet group	SMS	Tel.	Email
Teacher 1	x	x	-	-	-	-	-	x	x
Teacher 2	x	-	-	-	-	-	-	x	-
Teacher 3	x	x	-	-	-	-	-	-	x
Teacher 4	x	-	-	-	x	-	-	x	
Teacher 5	x	x	-	-	-	-	x	x	x
Teacher 6	x	-	-	-	-	-	x	-	-
Teacher 7	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Teacher 8	x	-	-	x	-	x	-	-	x
Teacher 9	x	x	-	-	x	-	-	x	-
Teacher 10	x	-	-	-	-	-	x	-	x
Teacher 11	x	-	-	-	-	-		x	-
Teacher 12	x	x	x	-	-	-	-	-	x
Teacher 13	x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Teacher 14	x	-	-	-	x	-	-	x	-

Thirteen of the 14 teachers in the department interacted with students on WhatsApp – a very popular web app among students in ENS. Fifteen attested that they were also engaged with students through the latter’s personal WhatsApp accounts (individual WhatsApp), SMS, and telephone to address specific questions that these students had posed to them through the same channels. The students reported that Padlet, Facebook, and Google classroom were not as user-friendly as WhatsApp, and this explains why those teachers who used them also used WhatsApp in the end. Three teachers used Zoom a few times. Teacher 7 was unable to use any of the applications. He could only get to the students in the F2F session. This, however, was not an isolated case. Many teachers in other departments at ENS waited to resume teaching only when F2F activities started on June 1. This present F2F session, though welcomed by the students, still posed problems to some. From the feedback received from them, only 60% (i.e. 58/98) said they were fully satisfied with the whole online project. This is a thing they had not been used to. Many cited lack of connectivity, power failure, the timing

of the virtual classes, etc. as sources of problems and wished to come back to a F2F classroom situation. On the other hand, some teachers acknowledged that they had not been able to satisfactorily explain the content of their courses in this virtual classroom phase, not least because of the difficulties of having students linked up at the scheduled time to participate. These preoccupations led to the return of F2F lectures.

### **3.3. June 1, 2020: return to F2F classes**

On May 26, 2020 the rector asked all deans and directors of schools of the UYI to prepare for the resumption of F2F classes beginning June 1. This resumption of teaching in lecture halls did not invalidate online activities. In fact, in the spirit of the communique, a hybrid model of learning/teaching remained the official policy of the university, and any F2F activity had to be done under strict social distancing rules which involved the fragmentation of classes into manageable groups. F2F teaching lasted for three weeks from June 1. During this time, those who had already advanced significantly with online teaching had the opportunity to revise; and those who had not been able to do anything significant online, accelerated work. At the end of the three weeks of teaching, a semester exam was successfully conducted under the same safety conditions.

## **4. Conclusion: what we have learned from remote teaching experience**

Teaching and learning English at the time of COVID-19 has been challenging for both students and teachers. The decision for classes to go online was unexpected. On the whole, both teachers and students received online teaching and learning with mixed feelings. While many teachers struggled to adapt to online environments, a few, for want of hands-on experience, stayed at the fringes, preferring only minimal engagement with technology. On the other hand, students cited internet connectivity, power failure at the time of online discussions, etc. as some sources of difficulty for them. Teachers themselves were not always at the top of the technology drive. My direct experience as Chair

of the department, who also had the responsibility to oversee the implementation of these virtual classes, is that the frequency with which online discussions were conducted was not enough for significant assimilation of any language content. I do not think we should just be contented with the fact that a teacher and a group of students went online. COVID-19 has taught us that the trend to technology-based learning is irreversible, either to solve the problem of safety or to solve the problem of high student-enrolment numbers that Cameroonian (and elsewhere in African) universities are currently experiencing. Consequently, we need to begin to formulate benchmarks for online teaching efficiency. The other issue to address is that of resources to access content online. UNESCO data suggests that 89% of students in sub-Saharan Africa do not have access to the internet (Aborode et al., 2020, p. 7).

The statistics for teachers is not better, either. African universities and other education stakeholders have to consider investing in the infrastructure that makes access to www cheap or free for students. Such modest attempts are already going on in countries like Rwanda and Tunisia, where universities are partnering with internet providers to provide zero-rated access to specific educational and information websites for the benefit of higher education (Aborode et al., 2020). Cameroon still has to get to this level. With a 60% (i.e. 59/98) approval by students who went through the experience of online teaching/learning during COVID-19 lockdown, a fair conclusion is that any online teaching has to be largely complemented with F2F activities.

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## 6. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/a7cqxxelf67lзма9j5vhmx1pfo6fn8rf>

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